



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN THE SAHEL REGION OF AFRICA

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By Michael Ardovino, Policy Analyst

Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Sahel Region of Africa

Overview

Freedom of religion or belief in the Sahel region of Africa has experienced serious regression in recent years due to the activities of violent extremist groups, the fragility of governments, the presence of the armed forces in politics, and ethno-religious clashes in isolated areas. *Violent* insurgent groups such as the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and Katiba Macina perpetrate serious violations against religious minorities, often in a context of weak state security.

Recent political trends in the Sahel reflect a common pattern: A weak state experiences an intervention by the armed forces, and a new praetorian government takes charge. While ostensibly cracking down to combat violent extremists, this government also uses accusations of extremism as a pretext for suppressing religious minorities. The new under-resourced state also requests and receives advice and physical support from external forces, including the Russian-backed *Wagner Group*, to confront the extremist elements. The state then begins to perpetrate religious freedom violations in the campaign against violent extremist groups. At the same time, competing ethnic and religious groups which historically distrusted one another may take sides for or against the new government, change alliances, or form armed auxiliary units to survive. This posturing may result in further effects on individuals' freedom of religion or belief.

This factsheet outlines this pattern in three Sahelian countries, Sudan, Mali, and Niger through the lens of freedom of religion or belief. In doing so, it considers the roles of fragile states, military intervention, and the presence of violent insurgents and ethnic/religious conflict within each country.

Sudan

Sudan's military government under the leadership of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), one of the longest lasting on the African continent, severely repressed traditional religious communities who themselves often intermixed with smaller ethnic groups within Darfur and the "Two Areas" of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. In 2017, Sudan was the first country in Africa to request Wagner Group assistance in security management

and natural resource extraction. The Wagner Group would serve as a foreign policy tool for the Russian government in the region in assisting Sudan's and other governments in these capacities.

After the fall of the Bashir government, the [transitional](#) government granted Muslim and Christian groups some important freedoms, earning praise and [support](#) from the U.S. government. However, the outbreak of new conflict in April 2023 within the state security apparatus has severely diminished any possibility of safe, open religious practice in Sudan.

Role of Military in Governance

Army officer Omar al-Bashir captured the Sudanese government in a coup in 1989 and served as president until 2019. He formed and later disbanded the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation, dissolved the parliament, banned political parties, and strictly controlled the press. One of his important allies was Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF). As allies, Bashir and Turabi imposed Shari'a as a source of law in 1991, creating [division](#) between the country's Muslim Arab North and the mainly Christian and animist South.

In April 2019, the Sudanese army overthrew Bashir, dissolved the government, suspended the constitution, and planned for an eventual new civilian government after two years. As part of a transitional government structure, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan became president and civilian Abdalla Hamdok became prime minister. In October 2021, after discontent within both the population and the armed forces, General al-Burhan launched a coup that removed Prime Minister Hamdok and his transitional government, briefly reinstating him in November 2021. General al-Burhan claimed that the military had taken over to avoid civil war but Hamdok's resignation in January 2022 only accelerated mass protests.

In April 2023, the rivalry between Burhan and the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, erupted into a high-intensity conflict between the army and RSF. In July and August, there were over [350 instances](#) of political violence and more than 1,090 reported fatalities because of the conflict between the competing factions. The RSF draws support from Darfur while allying with former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal, and the Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) against the army. Meanwhile, the army is based at the

epicenter of the conflict in Khartoum state with the capital mostly destroyed from combat.

Implications for Religious Freedom

With the fall of the Bashir regime in 2019, the interim government produced a constitutional declaration that included several provisions protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief and worship "in accordance with the requirements of the law and public order." Unlike the former constitution, it made no reference to Shari'a as a source of law, although the clause restricting the death penalty permits its imposition in the form of *hudud* (religiously prescribed) punishments for certain crimes. The transitional government also took positive steps to repeal repressive laws and regulations that restricted religious freedom, including the country's public order and apostasy laws.

Under the transitional government, Sudanese Christians could manifest their beliefs in [public](#) and even hold celebrations. Small sects such as the Bahri Evangelical Church publicly celebrated Christmas. Some restrictions remained, however, including a convoluted system of zoning restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles that prevented congregation members from reclaiming property from the government and receiving formal recognition of their churches.

The 2021 coup, launched by General Abdel Fattah Burhan, resulted in violence and deaths, and [caused uncertainty](#) for religious minorities including [Christians](#) who voiced the desire for a return to civilian control and commitments to protecting freedom of religion or belief, including not imposing specific religions on individuals.

In March 2022, the military government police arrested Pastor Abdulla Haroun Sulieman of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Gezira State and charged him with witchcraft for leading a prayer meeting that allegedly healed his mother. Police also arrested four men in June in Central Darfur for apostasy and [jailed](#) and tortured them but later released the men. In April, private citizens attacked an Evangelical Lutheran pastor in his congregation during a church service in [Gezira](#) and local Wahhabis interrupted Pastor Kujo's church services and assaulted him in [April](#). An unknown person also killed a Christian teacher in Dilinge in October.

In 2023 during the chaos of the civil conflict, the army has recruited thousands of former [intelligence](#) operatives from Bashir's Islamist-supported government, raising concerns among religious minorities that Burhan's army

faction is pursuing a final government based on strict interpretations of Shari'a law.

The neighborhood *battles* between the army and RSF destroyed 12 mosques and killed five civilians. On April 24 in Elgenina, West Darfur, battles between the army and RSF destroyed three mosques and the main mosque in Alobid, North Kordofan, sustained significant damage from bullets. The armed factions also targeted mosques in Burri and Omdurman.

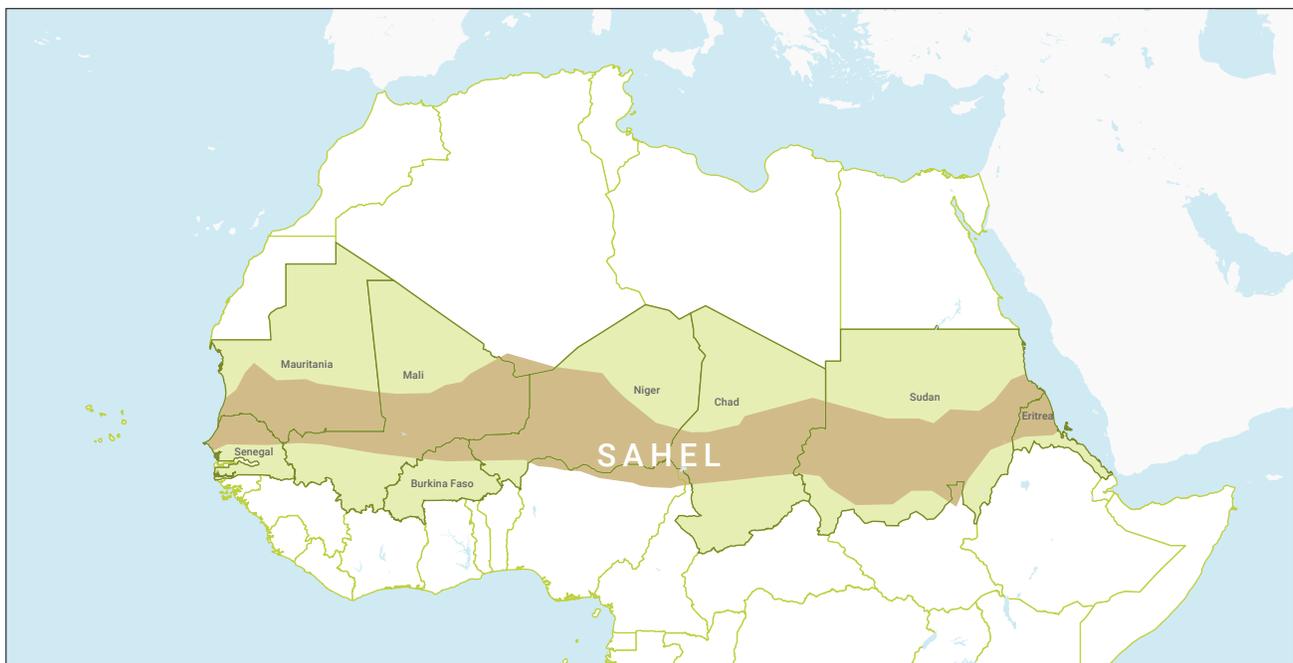
On April 17, RSF personnel *raided* the Sudanese Episcopal Church in Khartoum, destroying meeting rooms and offices and eventually converting the building into a base of operations. On May 3, combatants looted the Coptic church in Khartoum Bahari; and on May 13, six armed men dressed in RSF uniforms raided St. George's Church in Omdurman, where at least 40 people had congregated for prayers. The perpetrators shot five people including the bishop and his son, and threatened to kill them if they did not convert to Islam. Meanwhile, the battle resulted in an attack on St. George Coptic church in Khartoum during May 14 Mass as churches were taking in clergy and Christians fleeing the destruction. Earlier in the month, a *rocket* hit another Coptic *church* and an explosion burned an Evangelical Presbyterian church in the Christian neighborhood of Khartoum. On May 14, armed men also raided the Our Lady Nile Avenue Church in Khartoum and converted it into a base.

Mali

Mali, like Sudan, had an authoritarian leader for several decades but politically liberalized much earlier, in 1991, after an armed forces intervention when General Amadou Toure overthrew the authoritarian government, held elections, and introduced a new constitution. In 2021, the government contracted with the Wagner Group to provide security and training support to the army and police. Wagner units frequently engage al-Qaeda and Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel) in combat. In September 2023, the government signed a mutual defense treaty, the *Alliance* of Sahel States, with Burkina Faso and Niger, to replace the former G5 treaty with France.

Role of Military in Governance

A March 2012 *coup* removed the country's democratically-elected leader, suspended the constitution, and created a regime led by the National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and Restoration of the State led by army Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo. The 2018 presidential election reflected increasing violence across the country, leading to a postponement and an eventual 2020 army capture of the government under Assimi *Goita*, who promised to confront the Islamic State. He marched on Bamako, and arrested Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and other government officials, and later dissolved the parliament. Goita claimed the public was fed up with corruption and economic instability. This new military government *claimed* violent extremist groups were using



intercommunal conflicts to expand their influence and secure new recruits.

Malian regular army units continue to commit human rights violations in the ongoing campaign against religious insurgents, with the [2021](#) detention and execution of 13 Muslim men in Koulikoro region and the 2022 executions of civilians in Mopti region, despite no evidence that any of the victims had an association with violent extremism. In March 2022, government forces along with Wagner Group units reportedly killed at least [300](#) people in a week-long counterinsurgency operation in the central town of Moura. Wagner Group units carried out many parts of the operation, including summarily executing dozens of men.

In June 2023, the military government held a [referendum](#) addressing the Malian constitution including the role that religion plays in governance and civil society. Islamic groups such as the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), the League of Imams and Scholars for Islamic Solidarity (LIMAMA), and over a dozen other organizations protested the use of the word *laïcité* (secularism) and proposed the insertion instead of “État multiconfessionnel” or multi-faith state in the fundamental law. Mali’s religious leaders expressed support for a new constitution, specifically one that respects the faith of most, if not all, of the country’s citizens. The referendum results indicated that 97% of those that voted (39.4% of the country’s 8.4 million registered voters) [approved](#) of the changes in the constitution. The next presidential election is scheduled for February 2024.

Implications for Religious Freedom

In a 2012 Islamist [uprising](#) in the north, Muslim insurgents and Tuareg rebels seized power in Gao and the historically-important Timbuktu. The insurgents declared the region an independent state and imposed a [Wahhabist](#) interpretation of Shari’a while destroying several Sufi religious [shrines](#) of great historical and cultural value, which they viewed as idolatrous. Since 2015, IS Sahel has caused the highest civilian fatality count in northern Mali. [IS Sahel targets the Daoussahak](#) most often using fatwas that permit attacks against villagers accused of allegiance to former rebel groups or any current rival armed Islamist groups. Villagers often pay Islamic [tithe](#) (zakat) to the IS Sahel, and must adhere to strict morality and dress codes, or face attacks by enforcers.

At the same time, [ethnic Fulani](#) Muslim herders began to join the insurgent [FLM](#) (Ansar al-Din Macina) led by Salafi preacher and Malian national Hamadoun Koufa who models his group on a 19th-century Fulani Muslim state. FLM later discussed an alliance with the Islamic State to create a new Fulani caliphate.

From 2017 to 2020, insurgents attacked several [Christian](#) churches in Central Mali and Islamists abducted Sister Gloria Cecilia [Narváez](#) Argoti, holding her nearly five years; raided the primarily [Christian](#) Dogon town of Sobame Da in Mopti, killing 100 people; and demanded [women](#) wear veils in Mopti and Timbuktu.

In [2022](#), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoune, united under the umbrella group Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and became active in the northern and central parts of the country. JNIM typically fights IS Sahel for control of overlapping territories. Both Islamist groups have [intimidated](#) teachers and made children attend Qur’anic classes and demanded that Christian schools convert into Muslim [madrassas](#). In the Menaka region, IS Sahel distributed Qur’ans to the population and notified them that [zakat](#) must be [paid](#) while the group simultaneously deployed [hisba](#) moral police units.

In 2023, the Christian community of Douna in Barapireli parish often experienced threats from unidentified violent insurgents who forbade ringing bells, playing musical instruments, and praying in churches. Insurgents also often request Christians to [convert](#) to Islam in Douna and threaten violence if people practice any faith other than Islam. In August, IS Sahel insurgents started using stoning and severing limbs as punishments for those they perceive as breaking laws in [Gao](#) and northeast Mali.

Niger

Like Sudan and Mali, Niger has a history of weak governance and the intervention by the armed forces into politics. Niger’s case is the most recent example of a newly transitioning military government responding to insurgent activities and while doing so, repressing, or permitting the repression of, freedom of religion or belief. In August 2023, the military government requested [assistance](#) from the Wagner Group when it appeared the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was staging a military intervention plan into Niger. General Salifou Mody, who led the coup against the civilian government, made the query to Wagner contacts

in neighboring Mali. In response, ECOWAS leaders [warned](#) Mody that his government would be responsible for any human rights violations committed by the Wagner Group, which accepted the call for assistance by the Nigerien government.

Role of Military in Governance

Niger experienced military coups in 1996, 1999, and 2010, with democratically elected governments taking power in 1991, 2004, 2011, and 2016. In July 2023, the Presidential Guard and, later, the army under the title National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP) [arrested](#) democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum.

Although international actors condemned the act and regional bodies such as ECOWAS threatened intervention, the Nigerien public voiced support for the coup. The Nigerien military government would implement policies used by neighboring coup-led states such as Burkina Faso and Mali that would [erode](#) civil liberties and fundamental rights, including freedom of press and expression and religious practices. In September 2023, the government [signed](#) a mutual defense treaty, the Alliance of Sahel States, to replace the former G5 treaty with France.

Implications for Religious Freedom

Direct ethnic and religious conflict are less prevalent in Niger than in Mali or Sudan. Property destruction and looting suggest material gain is the primary objective of most insurgent groups. At the same time, armed groups did conduct targeted campaigns of killing and threats against so-called informants including local government officials, traditional leaders, and security forces.

Since 2018, insurgent activity has grown in Niger, with a record year for fatalities in 2021 when radical insurgent groups killed over [420](#) persons and drove thousands from their homes. Insurgents targeted ethnic Tuaregs (who number about 3 million) in Tahoua region and ethnic Zarma. Insurgents also recruited heavily from the nomadic Peuh-Fulani in Tahoua.

In 2021, insurgents attacked five churches in the northern Tillabéri region. There, IS Sahel and JNIM affiliates levied *zakat* on villagers in 2022 and burned government-funded schools, advising villagers to keep their children out of secular schools. The government reported that hundreds of schools closed in Tillabéri because of insecurity, and many villagers fled the region as well.

The pre-coup democratically elected government prohibited full-face veils in the Diffa Region and prohibited open air, public proselytization events by all religious groups, citing security concerns. The government used violent insurgent activity to justify control over sermons and media usage of religious messages. Authorities did not regulate private Qur'anic schools but did encourage clergy to focus on promoting national unity, brotherhood, and peaceful coexistence in their sermons.

In 2022, officials arrested Muslim cleric Alfa Ali Boubacar and charged him with “production and dissemination of information prejudicial to public order and incitement of violence,” specifically because he issued a *fatwa* against the regime during a prayer and criticized the government. Officials then released him but subsequently rearrested him, and he remained imprisoned in Filingué in December 2022. Whether the military government will continue other policies of the prior administrations remains to be seen.

In 2022, political violence generally increased but [deaths](#) decreased. Government security forces increased their presence by one third to counter insurgent groups, especially in the western Tillabéri region most affected by conflict. IS Sahel and the al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM are also very active in the southeast. The central part of the country has a mixture of IS Sahel insurgents along with bandits. Across the country, smugglers transporting gold and other natural resources, and narcotics, work with cross-national [rebel](#) groups in Chad, Libya, and Algeria.

The coup and the political mobilization of the citizenry after the ejection of French forces created a national fervor that was not only anti-colonial and anti-European but seemingly [anti-Christian](#). Some church representatives warned that such a national emotional climate, combined with economic uncertainty, might encourage attacks on churches and congregants as occurred in years past. In addition, insurgent groups have the capability to cross international borders and attack [villages](#), especially near the Burkina Faso border. In July 2023, attackers destroyed property at a [church](#) in the same area, setting fire to the building and killing male congregants as they tried to escape, forcing their families to flee to Burkina Faso.

The [presence](#) of the IS Sahel became so prevalent that churches halted activities in some rural areas of the south where Christians are most visible. In June, 69 families left their homes after insurgents threatened them with death if they refused conversion to Islam in a [village](#) near the Burkina Faso border in the southwest part of the country.



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From January to June of 2023, political violence [declined](#) by an estimated 39% when compared to the previous six-month period from July to December 2022. In March with the assistance of the [government](#) and U.S. diplomats, insurgents [released](#) a California missionary kidnapped on October 14, 2016. Jeffery Woodke was serving the Arcata First Baptist Church as a Youth with A Mission aid worker when al-Qaeda insurgents took him.

Conclusion

The Sahel region of Africa reflects a general deterioration in conditions for freedom of religion or belief. In the states of Sudan, Mali and Niger, the presence of insurgent groups, ethnic and religious conflict, and the continual intervention of military actors in politics have a direct impact on religious communities.

Freedom of religion or belief in the Sahel region exists within a complex and constantly changing context. Within this context, violent insurgent groups seeking to expand their territory threaten fragile national governments, prompting military units to respond with asymmetrical

force against the insurgents. These operations kill civilians and involve arresting innocent bystanders who often become prisoners in a broken judicial system. The [families](#) of these prisoners lose a valuable source of income, creating a hostility towards the government and at times eventual sympathy for the insurgents. This overall dynamic expands support for insurgents and boosts their recruiting pools, further weakening Malian, Nigerian, and Sudanese government control over their respective territories. The perpetration of religious freedom and other human rights violations then becomes more common, especially against religious minorities.

The presence of the Wagner Group in the Sahel reduces direct Western influence on counterinsurgency operations there and reflects a new great power competition among non-African states vying to influence the region. On the other hand, the greater use of U.S. Department of [Treasury](#) sanctions against both IS Sahel and JNIM leaders along with Wagner Group officials could effectively hinder the three organizations' financial network, disrupting the deterioration of freedom of religion or belief.

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Danielle Ashbahian
Chief of Public Affairs

Keely Bakken
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Researcher

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research & Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Senior Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan
Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller
Researcher

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre
Researcher

Jamie Staley
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson
Researcher

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